

Other Resistors

Parks was not the first to refuse to give up her seat and be arrested. A trickle of people over the previous decade — Viola White, Geneva Johnson, Hilliard Brooks, Epsie Worthy, Claudette Colvin, Mary Louise Smith — had made stands on the bus and faced law enforcement (either being arrested or, in Brooks' case, killed by police). That accumulation had led people to a breaking point. Parks herself wanted to see “what rights we really had.” She described her bus stand in terms of refusing to consent to segregation: “I felt that if I did stand up, it meant that I approved of the way I was being treated, and I did not approve.”

In 1944, Viola White who worked at Maxwell Airforce Base (like Rosa Parks during this time) was beaten and arrested for refusing to give up her seat. Found guilty, White then appealed her case to the circuit court. “The city of Montgomery knew they couldn't win,” E.D. Nixon explained, “and we couldn't get on the court calendar.” The case was held up indefinitely. Shortly afterwards, the police retaliated, and a white police officer seized Viola White's 16-year-old daughter and raped her. The daughter had the presence of mind to memorize the officer's license plate and boldly reported the crime. After many attempts by Nixon, a warrant for the officer's arrest was issued but the police chief tipped off the officer who left town. Shortly after, Viola White died, derailing any further legal action.

In 1946, Geneva Johnson was arrested for “talking back” to a driver and not having the correct change. She did not appeal but paid her fine. A few years later, Mary Wingfield was arrested for sitting in seats reserved for whites. In 1949, two New Jersey teenagers, Edwina and Marshall Johnson, refused to give up their seats and were arrested.

In 1950, a veteran Hilliard Brooks who had just returned from service paid his fare but refused to exit the bus and enter through the back door. Brooks asked the driver for his money back but the driver refused. Brooks, who allegedly had been drinking, refused to back down. The police were called. Mattie Johnson, a passenger, witnessed the altercation. “And when you're waitin' on something awful to happen, you feel it more than any other time. It feels like it's pressing down on you, getting' tighter and tighter around you, cuttin' you off from everything else.” A police officer boarded the bus and hit Brooks with his club. Brooks managed to get free and tried to exit the bus. The officer then shot Brooks who subsequently died from the wounds. The Brooks family, who had two young children and were expecting a third, lived across the walkway from the Parks at the Cleveland Courts apartments. The killing was ruled a justifiable homicide because the officer said that Brooks had resisted arrest. His murder “passed unnoticed except by his family and maybe a few others who were concerned at the time,” according to Parks.

The next year, Epsie Worthy exited the bus after the driver insulted her. When he followed her off and began hitting her, she fought back, “defend[ing] herself ...with all her might.” Worthy “gave as much as she took,” according to passengers. The police broke up the fight but only Worthy was

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charged with disorderly conduct and fined fifty-two dollars. The driver was not sanctioned.

Parks was Nixon's right-hand woman during many of these cases and personally knew a number of the individuals who had resisted. Riding the bus for her required a persistent struggle, telling an interviewer in 1968 that it was a "constant offense" and that she "was always in conflict with it." Many times, when she could, she avoided the bus.

Along with outright resistance, black passengers developed a series of daily tactics, to contest disrespect on the bus. Black passengers were arrested — or more commonly thrown off the bus — for "making noise," by talking back to the conductor, challenging another passenger, or giving an impromptu speech on racism. Many in Montgomery like Rosa Parks herself refused the practice of some bus drivers to require black people to pay in the front, exit the bus, and re-board in the back. Parks had been thrown off the bus for being 'uppity' and refusing to do this.

Related primary source: [Negro Ministers of Montgomery and Their Congregations, "To the Montgomery Public"](#), statement that references previous arrests like White's, Brook's, Colvin's